**1.15 Life for Israelites Under Herod – Where is the Messiah?**

When Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63, B.C., the fortunes of the Jewish people were now tied up with those of Rome. So…they asked the following questions:

* Will we be able to observe Torah?
* Do we have to worship the Roman gods?
* Can we be Roman citizens without defiling our Jewish faith?

In a lot of ways, this would depend on the Rome-appointed governor of Judea. Rome had a policy of Pax Romana (the peace of Rome). In other words, we’ll (mostly) leave you alone, as long as you don’t cause trouble, and as long as you pay your taxes.

Judea of course was the Roman province where the Jews lived – so they were always anxious about whom the Romans would pick to be their “king”. In 40 B.C., the Roman senate appointed Herod as king of Judea, and when Octavian (later known as Caesar Augustus) became sole ruler of the Roman empire, Herod retained his position after pledging loyalty to Caesar.

Herod the Politician:

Herod wasn’t daft. He knew that as king of Judea, his main challenge would come from the Jews – they were the majority, they had recent memory of their own Hasmonean rule, and would likely resent a return to subjugation (this time, from Rome). So…being the smart dude that he was, he married an “insider” – **Mariamne** (she was a blood relative from the Hasmonean royal family). While this was a good political move, all evidence suggests that he really did love her. However, in any royal court, nothing beats a good piece of juicy gossip. Herod’s sister, who never liked Mariamne started rumours about her “extra-curricular activities”. While never proved, he nonetheless had her, and her mother (his mother-in-law) executed.

There had always been rumours about his mental stability and the incident cited above seemed to have led him into deep depression and greater paranoia. In fact, he was so paranoid that he would later have Mariamne’s brothers killed because of his fear that they were trying to steal his throne. And this was only the beginning of a long series of murders, plots, rumours and suffering for all in his realm.

Herod and the Jews:

Christians know about Herod because of the record of him in the gospel of Matthew. How did the Jews who lived under his rule view him? Did any of them see him as “Messiah”?

Very few. As stated previously, Herod knew his audience (Jewish). He did try to reach out, including a massive rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (the ultimate suck up move). He also built a port in the ancient city of Caesarea, kept Rome happy, and provided a level of stability and peace (pax Romana). However, Jews could not make the link between him and their promised Messiah, and when you add in his erratic behavior and his ordering of so many murders, they simply had no respect for him.

Herod and Jesus:

It should not surprise us that the story of Jesus coming to earth (a.k.a. the “Incarnation”), happened during the reign of Herod, and that Herod acted in the way that he did – by ordering the “slaughter of innocents” – all Jewish boys under the age of two. He was a very, very, paranoid man. If his subjects were murmuring that “their king”, the “king of the Jews” has arrived, it should not surprise us that this particular man, acted in the way that he did. Near the end of his life, a first century historian named Josephus observed the following: “…(Herod) *was a man of great barbarity towards all equally*.” The irony should not be lost on you. During the reign of one of the most cruel earthly rulers of all time, the “prince of peace” is born!

Herod died in 4 B.C..

Notes from the Biography of Herod:

* What are the positive accomplishments of Herod?
* What are the examples of his cruelty and paranoia?
* How do the artists who attempt to portray Herod, portray him?
* Why do some historians remain skeptical that there was a “slaughter of Jewish boys”?