

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: I am Herod the Great. Or, I was Herod the Great.

The question of what Christmas means to me is a sore subject. I don't want to talk about it. Christmas ruined me. It tarnished my reputation. It destroyed my legacy. In the great drama of human history, that penniless child born in that stable in insignificant Bethlehem no less. He upstaged me. Me—Herod the Great. Christmas was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I tried to eradicate it. I should have tried harder.

If you want to know what Christmas means to me, let's start with the word me. Let me tell you about me. If it wasn't for Jesus grabbing all the oxygen in the room for the last 2,000 years, you would know a lot more about me. I am called "Herod the Great" for a great reason.

My father was from Edom, you would call him an Arab today, and he lived in what is now known as southern Jordan. My mother came from a noble Nabatean family from the great city of Petra. Our people converted to Judaism a hundred years or so before I was born. When the Romans invaded Palestine in 63 BC, my father, Antipar, sided with Rome. For that, our Jewish family was granted Roman citizenship and rewarded with power. I made friends with Mark Antony, yes of Antony and Cleopatra fame, and I leveraged that friendship throughout my shining career.

When I was just twenty-five years old, the Romans appointed me to be the provincial governor of Galilee. At age thirty-six, I was named by the Roman senate as king of Judea; that is, "king of the Jews." Let that sink in for a minute.

I was a Jew. I was a Roman citizen. I was king of the Jews.

One of my greatest accomplishments was to completely rebuild and expand the Temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon gets pages and pages of credit in the Bible for building the Temple, but his Temple got destroyed. I rebuilt it. Magnificently!

In keeping with the Jewish law, I employed 1,000 priests as masons and carpenters. But do I get any credit for that in the Bible? No. Do any of you know any Bible verses extolling my virtue in restoring the Temple? No. Because there aren't any. That's just one of the many reasons Christmas enrages me. If it wasn't for him, If it wasn't for that baby. If it wasn't for Jesus, I would be remembered as a Biblical hero. Instead, I am a Biblical villain.

If you take a trip to the Holy Land today, the tour buses will stop and show you what remains of all my magnificent building projects. You will see Masada, a cliff-top palace-fortress decorated with intricate mosaics and equipped with water cisterns to withstand a lengthy siege. You will see the Herodium, full of palaces with bathhouses, pool houses, and other structures. All of this was constructed on top of a human-made hill seven and a half miles outside of Jerusalem.

I built fortresses, amphitheaters, water supply systems, and harbors. I built the entire port city of Caesarea, including markets, wide roads, baths, temples, storerooms and a palace with an ocean view—for me, of course. That palace even had a decorative pool. For the city's breakwaters, I imported over 24,000 cubic meters of volcanic ash from Italy. My workers quarried 12,000 cubic meters of both local stone and lime to mix with the ash to make the underwater cement for those breakwaters. I could go on and on about Caesarea alone.

Herod the Great! That's me. That was me . . . until it all started to unravel. You know the story. Wise men from the East came to me, the king of Judea, the king of the Jews. And what do they ask? "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage".

Can you imagine! Coming to me, the king of the Jews, for directions to a new king of the Jews so they can pay him homage? They should have been tripping over their robes to bow down to me! I could've had them killed on the spot for their insolence. I should've.

Can you comprehend how insulted I felt? This would be like going to the home of, oh I don't know, to Roger Federer, and asking him to refer you to a really great tennis player. Or it would

be like going to that cellist, that one you all seem to like, Yo-Yo Ma, and saying, “Hey, where can I go to hear the best cello player in the world?” It would be like going to Egypt, walking up to the great pyramids, and asking the locals for directions to their most impressive monument.

That moment, that visit from those “wise men from the East” as you call them, that was my undoing. I sensed the threat. I always did. When my own sons turned against me, I had them killed. When my wife turned against me, I had her and her whole family killed. I could do that. I had power and no qualms about using it. After all, I had nine other wives.

So of course I plotted against this “newborn king of the Jews.” I feigned interest and enthusiasm for the child. My performance deserved an Oscar. “When you have found him,” I told the men, “bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage”. We all know what I really meant, but I didn’t say that out loud.

I thought those wise men would be fooled, but they fooled me. After they found the child, they went home another way. Without telling me. That did it! From that day forward, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this child would be my undoing.

Christmas—I did everything I could to ruin it. I did everything I could to eradicate it from memory before it could take root. I ordered all the baby boys under the age of two to be slaughtered. But that wasn’t enough to silence that persistent inner voice telling me that no matter how many palaces I built, no matter how many structures I put my name on, I was nothing and I was nobody in relation to this newborn peasant baby.

My grandeur unraveled before my eyes. Or was it I that unraveled? I looked around at everything I’d built. If this child should live, my accomplishments would turn to rubble. They’d become the relics of history books, of interest only to archaeologists and gawking tourists. If this child were to live, his legacy—I sensed—would be a living, breathing thing, a worldwide movement, a force for good that would make my greatness folly.

What Christmas means to me is that while I will have my monuments, this child will have communities. I will be remembered, but he will be worshiped. I had power over peoples' lives, but he has their hearts. This child won't use any of my tactics. No threats, no bribes, no intrigue, no show of force. He'll win them in ways I will never understand. Not overpowering them? And still, they will give themselves over to him. They will call him Lord, Savior, Master, Teacher. They will serve him by their own choice. More willingly, more joyfully than any slave or favored servant of mine ever did.

For me, Christmas was the beginning of the end of tyranny as a legitimate form of earthly rule. That child born in Bethlehem will be powerful in his weakness. Oooo, that shakes me to my core. He will lead by serving. He will kneel before his own subjects. He will do their dirty work, and he will triumph.

They will love him. His kingdom will grow. Mine will implode.

They will create music and art to show their devotion. At Christmastime, they will sing songs, one after another after another, all about him. Him! I'll only appear in one verse of one carol. It's like I'm a raging mass murderer or something.

What Christmas means to me is my demise. That devastating black mark on my magnificent career. It ruined my reputation. It cast me as history's bad guy. I'm now known as the one that was duped by the wise men. I'm known by names like paranoid, raging, merciless.

Christmas showed me the limits of my influence. It put me in my place. Nobody else had ever managed to do that. I just couldn't get my way with Jesus. Leveraging people and situations for my own benefit always worked. Always allowed me to control others. But that did not work with Jesus. He lived.

And you know what? I'm left with disdainful respect for this child. Nobody else was able to penetrate the shell of my ego. But Jesus danced all over that, turning my name from famous to infamous. Only one person in the Gospel story is more hated than me, Judas Iscariot.

But Judas never had the glory, honor, power, dominion, and authority that I held—I mean, I was the king of the Jews, remember? Christmas took that all away from me and from all tyrants who would come after me.

They call him Emmanuel which, if you don't know, means "God-with-us." How do you compete with God? You don't. Even Herod the Great is a nobody next to the Christ child in the manger. That is why I will always hate Christmas. It gave people a choice: him or me. They chose him.

Let me tell you a secret. It is my deepest, darkest secret. I don't blame them.

Truly yours, Herod the (not so) Great.