

# THE SLAUGHTER OF INNOCENCE

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BY DAVID WEALE

AND IN ALL THE HOUSES THE MOTHERS LAMENTED LOUDLY, WAILING FOR THEIR BABIES, WHICH WERE NO MORE

Many of the statements of Jesus were disturbing; calculated to shock and awaken. But of all his sayings perhaps the most startling was directed against those who abuse children. "If anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble," he said, "it would be better for such a one if a millstone were hanged around his neck, and he were cast into the depths of the sea." End of lesson.

The cruel treatment of children is a theme which shows up early in the life of Jesus, and while it is not a scene you will ever find on a Christmas card, the gruesome 'slaughter of the innocents' is included in the Gospel of Matthews as part of the Christmas narrative. Like many things dark and horrific we try not to think of it, but it is there, in the original story, a brilliant allegorical reminder of how the forces of ego-fear and power addiction always resist the subversive energies of the child.

According to the account it was the Wise Men from the east who inadvertently precipitated the tragedy. It appears they were asking around, attempting to discover where the infant "King of the Jews" was to be born, little realizing the effect this would have on the reigning monarch, a certifiable psychopath named King Herod, who would do anything to hold on to power. When he got word of the possible appearance of a rival "king" his legendary paranoia was greatly inflamed. He summoned the wise men, and gave instructions that when they discovered the infant they should immediately report back to him. "I too will go and pay him homage," he declared with a straight face, disguising his murderous intentions.

The Wise Men probably did not realise they were dealing with a man who, out of fear for this throne, had already executed two of his own sons; a man who would later pre-arrange the cold-blooded killing of a number of his own prominent subjects to coincide with his own death. The purpose, it seems, was to ensure a mood of sadness and mourning

throughout the Kingdom when he died. Oh, yes! Herod was a monster all right, but an unmistakably human one.

The Wise Men continued their star-led journey and discovered the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. It was their intention to report back to Herod as requested, but being warned in a dream that they should stay away from the King, they returned home a different way.

The thwarted Herod was infuriated. In his deranged mind the failure of the wise men to honour his request was further evidence of the threat to his sovereignty. Believing the child had been born in Bethlehem, but not knowing what child it was, he issued to his soldiers a terrible blanket order - kill them all! According to the story, every male child in Bethelhem was put to the sword, so that Herod, at least for the time, could go back to sleeping easily.

The massacre, despite its malefic thoroughness, failed in its purpose. Jesus's father, like the Wise Men, was warned in a dream of the impending danger. Under cover of darkness the little family slipped away, and journeyed out of the country to Egypt. The child was saved, and would one day return, to announce the coming of a new Kingdom, which could only be seen and entered by those who were able to become, "as little children."

The historical accuracy of these events is a moot historical point, but whether or not they actually happened does not detract from the mythic power of the account. The Herod story reveals starkly a universal aspect of human experience; namely, the repression of innocence and exuberance in the interest of social and institutional continuity. To greater or less degree, the spirit of every child, in every age, must be sacrificed to the sensibilities of any number of authority figures, and the exigencies of the established order.