

Truth or Fiction: Did Herod Really Slaughter Baby Boys in Bethlehem?

Embedded in the Christmas story and in the birth narrative of Jesus into this world is a dark story of loss and tragedy, of tears and pain. [Matthew 2:16](#) has been traditionally called the “massacre of the innocents.” There we are told about the killing of all boys two years old and younger in the region of Bethlehem. The event is deeply unsettling, but it’s also part of the historical record of the birth of Christ — or is it? Did this actually happen historically? Or was this massacre of the innocents a story invented by early Christians? And if the event is historically real — if such a public slaughter really happened — why are there no other historical records to corroborate the event?

For answers, we welcome special guest Paul Maier, a widely respected historian, in what will be a little longer of an episode than usual. Until his retirement, Dr. Maier served as the Russell H. Seibert Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University. And he is the author of many fictional books and many non-fiction books including [In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church](#), as well as several books for children, including [The Very First Christmas](#).

Who Was Herod the Great?

Dr. Maier, thanks for joining us. I want to ask you if [Matthew 2:16](#) really happened in history. There’s a question mark on this event. But before we go there, who is this figure we know of in the Christmas story as Herod the Great?

Well, Tony, you may be surprised to hear this, but believe it or not, if you are ever asked which is the one figure from the ancient world on whom we have more primary evidence from original sources than anyone else in the world, the answer is not Jesus or Saint Paul or Caesar Augustus or Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great. No, it’s Herod the Great — believe it or not. Why? Because Josephus gives us two whole book scrolls on the life of Herod the Great. And that is more primary material than anyone else. And I don’t think Herod deserved it.

He was a remarkably successful politician in keeping the peace between Rome, which had conquered Judea ever since 63 BC, and he acted as a Roman governor overseas. He is simply known as a client king, meaning that very often when the Romans conquered a province, they didn’t want to send a governor out. There was a local king doing a good enough job, and so yes, he may be called *king*, but he was definitely deferent to Rome for his whole administration.

He was in charge from 40 BC when he was awarded the title *king*. He didn’t actually take control of the land until, with Roman help, he drove some adversaries out of Jerusalem, and so really from about 37 BC on, he is in charge until his death in 4 BC.

He was remarkably successful in a lot of ways. He deserves the title Herod the Great if we talk about his accomplishments through much of his life. He was the one, of course, who

rebuilt the great temple in Jerusalem. He was the one who singlehandedly created the city of Caesarea. Where there was no good port in the holy land, he creates one by sinking some ship hulls and then using those as a base to build a breakwater in an otherwise rectilinear seacoast. He built Caesarea in twelve years, and he built other cities like that too. In Jerusalem he facelifted the entire city. In addition to building a gorgeous palace for himself, he had a hippodrome (a stadium) and theaters and the like. He was kind of a Hellenistic monarch. And he also built seven great fortresses across the land, strongpoints from which he could defend his administration. One of them, of course, the most famous, was Masada down along the southwest corner of the Dead Sea.

Everything he touched diplomatically seemed to turn to gold. He kept peace both with Jerusalem and Rome, and so in that sense he was very successful.

A Real 'Family Man'

Yes, he was politically successful, but there's another side to Herod. Explain the paranoid side of Herod that begins to emerge later in his life.

Basically, he was responsible for many of the problems back home. His home was a can of worms simply because he married ten wives, and each of those produced princes for him, and each of those male princes was scheming to succeed as number one — and there can only be a single number one. And so, if there weren't two or three collateral plots taking place before they had orange juice in the morning, you know, something was wrong.

Josephus gives us just a hideous tale of what was going on in the family with attempted poisonings, one brother against another. It so rattled Herod that he actually put to death three of his own sons on suspicion of treason. He put to death his favorite wife out of ten of them. Mariamne was his favorite. She was a Hasmonean Macabean princess, and he put her to death, and then he killed his mother-in-law — I should say, one of his many mothers-in-law. He invited the high priest down to Jericho for a swim. They played a very rough game of water polo and they drowned him. He killed several uncles and a couple of cousins. Some have said sarcastically that he was a real “family man.”

As a matter of fact, Augustus himself, to whom Herod was always very deferent, said, “I would rather be Herod's pig than his son.” It is a double pun. In Greek it is *choiros* and *huios*, a clever turn on words, and the other idea is that at least pigs weren't slaughtered for human consumption over there; they had a better chance at a longer life. And so it was a brilliant pun on the part of Augustus.

Ouch. Yes.

Herod's Bloodthirst

At one point late in his life, Herod plots to kill a stadium full of Jewish leaders. The plot fails, but what does it reveal about him?*

Well, Josephus has a very grisly thing to report about Herod in his last months. He was paranoid, though he did have some grasp of reality. For instance, he was worried that nobody

would mourn his own death. Of course, that shows how deadly accurate he was. They were preparing a general celebration. And nobody likes to die knowing that they are going to dance on your grave. And so he was going to give the people something to cry about. In 4 BC he is in his winter palace in Jericho. It's the only place in the holy land that doesn't get snow or get cold in the winter; it's 1,200 feet below sea level. And Herod is dying. He tries every remedy in the world to stop the gang of diseases that were creeping up on him. He went to the hot springs on the northeastern corner of the Dead Sea, Callirrhoe (which is still springing hot water two thousand years later), and that didn't cure him. So he goes back to his winter palace, and he invites his sister Salome over, and he says, "I want you to arrest all the Jewish leaders in the land and imprison them in the hippodrome, just below the palace here." (And the hippodrome has been discovered archaeologically, by the way.) And so she does what he asks, and then she says, "Brother, why am I doing this?" And Herod says, "Well, I know that when I die the Jews are going to rejoice. So I want to give them something to cry about." And so he wants these leaders all executed in that hippodrome, so that there will be thousands of households weeping at the time Herod the Great dies. So is that the kind of sweet guy who could have killed the babies in Bethlehem? Yeah, I think so.

Yes, most certainly — goodness.

Infanticide in Bethlehem — Fact or Fiction?

Speaking of Matthew 2, the Bible records this scene from Herod's paranoia late in his life. The wise men alert him to the birth of a new king in Bethlehem. He wants to know where, so he can eradicate this new rival. The wise men wisely don't return. Herod then responds by slaughtering all boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and in "all the region." For all that Josephus writes about Herod, he makes no mention of this — in fact, there's no extra-biblical evidence that this slaughter ever happened. How do you respond?

No, it is interesting. Josephus does not mention it. And therefore, a lot of biblical critics will pounce on that aspect of the nativity account and say, therefore it didn't happen. Now please understand that this is an argument from silence, and that is the weakest form of argumentation you can use. As we say in the profession, *absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.*

In this case, one or two things could have happened. Josephus may have heard about it and not used it because maybe you don't have hundreds of babies killed; maybe you have only about twelve, as a matter of fact — twelve or fifteen. The infant mortality in the ancient world was so huge anyway that this is really not going to impress the reader too much, believe it or not. And I think if Josephus is choosing between the two stories about how Herod died right before his death, I think I would take the one where he is going to slaughter hundreds of Jewish leaders.

Or he may not have heard about it. Again, simply because, in little Bethlehem, it doesn't amount to much — a village of about fifteen hundred residents. In my actuarial study, Bethlehem at the time wouldn't have had more than about two dozen babies two years old and under — half of them female. And so this is not a big deal, and I think that is why Josephus either never heard about it or didn't feel it important enough to record. So this does not militate against Matthew's version by any means.

In fact, I was arguing once years ago on the infant massacre with a professor at Wagner College in New York who claimed that this is all fiction — that surely a massacre of hundreds of Jewish boy babies would have come to the attention of other accounts of history. Well, I agree it would have *if there had been hundreds of slaughters*. But that is ridiculous. A little village that size to have *hundreds* of boy babies, two years old and younger? It couldn't possibly be the case.

The KJV adds “in all the coasts thereof.” Well, look: Jerusalem is five miles away, right? So this would include Jerusalem as well if we are going to take literally “all the coasts thereof.” We are talking about Bethlehem and probably a half-mile around when we are talking about the surroundings of Bethlehem.

Fascinating — and certainly no less a real tragedy. So, finally, as a historian, in your mind, is there any reason to doubt the historicity of the slaughter of the innocents?

I see not one iota of evidence here it could not have happened. And therefore, again, there is no reason to doubt the account as far as I am concerned. To be sure, Luke hasn't heard about it. Remember, Matthew and Luke don't copy from one another when it comes to the Nativity. And that is good, because this way they can hit it from different angles. I think it really happened. And let's remember again that the first martyr of Christianity was not Stephen; it was Jesus. But not even Jesus, for my money, the first martyr in the Christian church, was not the first baby sought out to be killed in Bethlehem, and we always overlook that.

[Paul Maier](#) Dr. Paul L. Maier is a widely respected historian. Until his retirement he served as the Russell H. Seibert Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University. He is the author of many books including *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church*, as well as books for children, including, *The Very First Christmas*.

Archaeology Illuminates & Affirms a Key Fact in the Christmas Story

By all counts, Luke's gospel is a wealth of historical information.

He opens it this way:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us... it seemed good to me also, having had a perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you might know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. (Luke 1:1;3-4)

Luke's primary concern is order and accuracy, so that the recipient of the document (a certain Theophilus), "might know the certainty of those things in which he was instructed (v. 4)."

Not only is Luke's account orderly, but it is also an excellent record of what truly happened that no-so-silent night, two thousand years ago.

The great classical archaeologist Sir William Ramsay, said that Luke was a "first-rate historian..."

One who writes "...historical works of the highest order, in which a writer commands excellent means of knowledge, either through personal acquaintance or through access to original authorities, and brings to the treatment of his subject genius, literary skill, and sympathetic historical insight into human character and the movement of events. Such an author seizes the critical events, concentrates the reader's attention on them by giving them fuller treatment..."[1]

One such event to which Luke draws attention is a government census which took place during the reign of Augustus before Christ was born. This event is a pivotal event in the Christmas story and is often looked at with skepticism by some.

At the very beginning of Luke's Christmas narrative in Luke 2:1-5 we are told that a census took place in the entire Roman world. The words are very familiar during Christmas as they are read aloud in so many sermons, plays, musicals and Christmas celebrations.

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered, to Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child (Luke 2:1-5).

For many years, historians and scholars have pointed to the passage above mentioning the decree by Quirinius, as problematic if not completely inaccurate. Did a census really take

place in the entire Roman world during that time, and did Mary & Joseph actually go up to Bethlehem to be registered, as Luke Gospel says?

New Testament scholar Dr. Harold W. Hoehner has summarized some of the top challenges faced by those who hold to the historical accuracy of Luke's account.

He writes:

“[Emil] Schurer states that Luke cannot be historically accurate because: (1) nothing is known in history of a general census during the time of Augustus; (2) in a Roman census Joseph would have not had to travel to Bethlehem but would have registered in the principle town of his residence, and Mary would not have had to register at all; (3) no Roman census would have been made in Palestine during Herod's reign; (4) Josephus records nothing of a Roman census in Palestine in the time of Herod – rather the census of A.D. 6-7 was something new among the Jews; and (5) a census held under Quirinius could not have occurred during Herod's reign for Quirinius was not governor until after Herod's death.”[2]

At first glance, these objections to the Roman census during the reigns of emperor [Imperator] Caesar Augustus (Octavius) and governor [legatus] Quirinus may seem insurmountable and quite difficult to answer, but an honest appraisal of the historical and archaeological evidence suggests that they are not.

The objections we will answer here are 1 and 2 – (1) the claim that nothing is known in the history of a general census during the time of Augustus, and (2) that in a Roman census Mary & Joseph would not have had to travel to Bethlehem to register.

Was There Census During the Reign of Augustus in the Roman World?

It is a commonly held assumption that the decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world was to be taxed, was a single census [a single event] in the entire Roman empire. The question is, is this how Luke understood it, or intended it to be understood? Very likely, not.

According to Hoehner, “What is meant is that censuses were taken at different times in different provinces – Augustus being the first one in history to order a census or tax assessment of the whole provincial empire. This is further substantiated by the fact that Luke uses the present tense indicating that Augustus ordered censuses to be taken regularly, rather than only one time.”[3]

New Testament historian Jack Finegan says, “As to the taking of such an enrollment in general, it is known from discoveries among the Egyptian papyri that a Roman census was taken in Egypt, and therefore perhaps also throughout the empire regularly, every fourteen years. Many actual census returns have been found, and they use the very same word (ἀπογράφω) which Luke 2:2 uses for the “enrollment.”[4]

The specific census which Luke mentions (Lk. 2:2), is that it “first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.”

Apart from Luke, we have two other historical sources concerning Quirinius – the Roman historian, Tacitus (Annals 3.48) and the Jewish/Roman historian, Flavius Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews 18.1-2).

According to Tacitus (Annals 3.48), P. Sulpicius Quirinius died in A.D. 21.

Josephus's reference to Quirinius in Antiquities of the Jews (18, I,1.) poses somewhat of a problem, because he informs us that the "taxings conducted by Quirinius while governing Syria were made in the thirty-seventh year of Caesar's victory over [Marc] Anthony at Actium in 31 B.C. This would place the census in about A.D. 6/7, a date which is too late to be brought into alignment with the birth of Christ which was likely in the winter 5/4 B.C.[5]

In Luke's account in Luke 2:2, he speaks of a census which "first" took place when Quirinius was governing Syria, so it is not out of the question that the census to which Josephus is referring was the second one, while Luke mentions the "first" one [i.e the earlier one].

Gleason Archer also notes that Luke, "was therefore well aware of the second census, taken by Quirinius in A.D. 7, which Josephus alludes to... We know this because Luke (who lived much closer to the time that Josephus did) also quotes Gamaliel as alluding to the insurrection of Judas of Galilee "in the days of census taking" (Acts 5:37).[6]

Additional evidence also seems to suggest that Quirinius served as governor twice which would then put him in an official position over Syria to enact the census of Luke 2:2. In 1784, a Latin inscription was discovered near Tivoli, located about twenty miles east of Rome. It is known as the Lapis Tiburtinus inscription, and according to Jack Finegan it, "...contains the statement of a high Roman official that when he became governor of Syria he entered the office for the second time (Latin, iterum). It has even been thought that this personage might have been Quirinius..."[7]

Whatever the identity is of the Roman official mentioned in the inscription, at minimum shows that it was not uncommon for Roman procurators to have served twice, and maximally it may eventually reveal that it was Quirinius himself, through further research.

Is it Plausible that Mary & Joseph Traveled to Bethlehem for the Census?

Luke 2:4-5 states: And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Mary & Joseph traveling to Bethlehem

Mary & Joseph traveling to Bethlehem

Objection 2 listed above states, that in a Roman census Joseph would have not had to travel to Bethlehem, but would have registered in the principle town of his residence, and Mary would not have had to register at all.

It was generally understood that Roman law instructed property owners to register for taxation in the district where they owned land. However, "...a papyrus dated to A.D. 104, records an Egyptian prefect who ordered Egyptians to return to their ancestral homes so that a census

could be taken. In the first century Rome, since the Jews' property was linked to their fathers (i.e. patriarchal), the Romans would certainly have allowed them the custom of laying claim to their family estate for taxation.”[8]

Since every person needed to appear in his ancestral homeland and since Mary was betrothed to Joseph, and pregnant with child, the two traveled to Bethlehem together. Surely Mary & Joseph would have understood the Scriptures, and the prophecies concerning Israel's Messiah – that He must be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). It must have been truly amazing from their perspective, to see pieces of the Messianic puzzle fall in place – even if the pieces were official decrees from the Roman empire!

Once again, when Scripture is placed under the scrutiny of historical and archaeological research, it stands the test in amazing ways.

This is but one small example of where archaeology and history corroborate the Scripture to the finest detail. Luke's gospel is just the first part of a two-volume set in which Acts is the second. Colin Hemer's massive study, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* details at least 84 facts in the last 16 chapters of Acts that have been confirmed by either historical or archeological research.

Truly Luke is indeed a remarkable historian. Like Theophilus, we can know the certainty of the things in which we have been instructed (the Gospel of Jesus Christ).

Jesus Came In the Fullness of Time

In Galatians 4:4 the Apostle Paul wrote: But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

When Jesus the Messiah arrived, His timing was perfect! From the appearing of the star to the wise men to the taking of the census by Rome, it was not too soon, and not too late. His first coming was not only perfect chronologically and historically, it was perfect in God's providential time.

If Christ's first coming is any indication of what the Second coming will be like – we can rest assured that the timing of His Second Coming (Revelation 19:11-21) will be right on God's perfect divine time, once again.

<https://crossexamined.org/really-census-time-caesar-augustus/>

[1] William Ramsay, *Saint Paul: The Traveler and Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001 reprint), 16.

[2] Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 14.

[3] *Ibid.*, 15

[4] Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past: The Archaeological Background of the Hebrew-Christian Religion, Volume II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 258.

[5] See Finegan, *Ibid.*, 259, See also Hoehner's work on this date which goes into much more detail in the original sources; *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), especially Chapter 1, 'The Date of Christ's Birth,' pp. 29-44.

[6] Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982),

[7] See, Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, Revised Edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), p. 304. A view also held by William Ramsay, *Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 4th Ed., London, 1920, pp. 275-300.