

A Rival King

King of the Jews! That's what they said, these astrologers, these sorcerers, these men from the east bearing expensive gifts. They were looking for "the one born King of the Jews", to quote their exact words.

I have been given many names and titles in my time. By race I am an Idumaeen, an Edomite, descended from Abraham's grandson, Edom (or Esau). But by religion I am a Jew, though many have cast aspersions on that fact, because my family converted to Judaism. I have also been called (by the religious among the people) Greek and Roman, because of my love of Greek culture and sport and Roman power.

My father, Antipater, was an official in the court of the last of the Hasmonean Kings of the Jews (who belonged to the family of Judas the Hammer). But he was also a friend of Julius Caesar, who made him administrator of Judea, and my father in turn made me governor of Galilee. The Romans then made me military prefect in southern Syria. And finally in Rome, before Antony and Octavian (he who is now our Emperor Augustus) and before the whole Roman Senate, I was designated "King of the Jews". I went on to conquer Antigonus, the last of the Hasmonean Kings, and beheaded him.

Edomite, Jew, Greek, Roman, Governor, Prefect and King. But my favourite title of all was an unofficial one, given me by the people because of all my achievements in conquests and in building projects: they called me “The Great”. You must admit it has a certain ring to it. “Herod the Great!” It reminds people I am in the same class as Alexander.

And yet, I achieved all this as King—King of the Jews. That is my official title, granted by no less than Caesar Augustus. So this is why I was rather perturbed, to put it mildly, when these astrologers asked for one born King of the Jews. Born king, mind you! I cannot help it that my father was not a king, and that I was not born into a Royal family. I know there are many who resent that fact and vilify my name and plot against me because of it. But I was made king by Caesar. You would think that should count for something!

So you can understand that when these eastern astrologers appeared in Jerusalem asking for one born King of the Jews, the whole city was in an uproar, because all my sons are grown up (at least those who’ve not rebelled against me!) and no boy had been born in my family recently.

Now this could not have happened at a worse time as far as I am concerned. I am now 70 years old—and not in the best of health. In fact to be frank, I am ill and

weak—I, who once was a great athlete, a champion and a warrior!

But that was not the worst of it. My kingdom was under threat. “Was”, do I say? Is! Is under threat! It continues to be under threat to this day, as my last remaining strength is failing. And under threat from my own son!

My own son conspired against me—Antipater, my eldest son, the son of my first wife Doris. I had made him my heir, but he could not wait for my death! He attempted to have me poisoned, but the poison was drunk by my brother Pheroras by mistake. Antipater is now in prison and I have received the permission of the Emperor Caesar to put him to death for the unholy crime of parricide.

But this is not the first time my kingship was in danger. It was ever thus! How is it that a man who has done so much good for his nation, should have been so slandered and conspired against, even by members of his own family!

Even my own wife, my second wife, the love of my life, my dearest Mariamne! She was the most beautiful of women. She was majestic. She was fiery. She was of excellent character... and yet... and yet, she betrayed me.

Of course, she came of royal blood—of the Hasmonean family—that was one of the reasons I

married her. It was either marry her or kill her. So I married her. But she was proud. I don't think she ever forgave me for killing off all her relations. But of course I had to—reasons of state. I couldn't let any rival kings arise to challenge me from her family. Why couldn't she be reasonable?

But what really turned her against me in the end was another business—it was blown up out of all proportion. It was all due to my mother-in-law interfering. She wanted her 16 year old son to be made High Priest, which I did, but then unfortunately the boy was drowned. There were scurrilous rumours that I had something to do with that, and my mother-in-law reported this to Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, who of course told Antony, and the upshot of it was that I was called to appear before Antony to explain myself.

I knew my kingship and indeed my very life was in peril, and I could not bear to think of Mariamne being taken by another after my death. So I decided to give secret orders to my uncle Joseph that if I was executed, Mariamne also was to be killed. Now, you may think that was harsh, and many have so represented it since, but it was not like that at all. It was because I loved her.

In the end I returned with Antony's favour, and everything would have been fine, but for the fact that Joseph had gone and had an affair with my wife and

blabbed the whole thing to her. Well I had to have him executed and none of this exactly endeared me to Mariamne!

That wouldn't have been so bad I suppose, were it not for the fact the whole thing happened again, when Octavian defeated Antony at the great battle of Actium, and I had to go to Rhodes to meet Octavian to try to save my kingdom after I had supported Antony. In that I was successful, but of course I had left the same orders concerning Mariamne, and again she found out and turned completely against me. Then my sister Salome informed me that Mariamne had been intending to poison me. When her servants were questioned under torture, the truth was discovered, and Mariamne had to be executed. I had no choice in the matter. My kingdom had to come first. My only consolation is that her mother was implicated too and was executed!

But that is when everything started to go wrong. Some even said (not to my face) that I was being punished by God for killing my wife. How dare they! After all the good I have done for the nation! But things were never the same again. I nearly lost my mind with grief. And everyone seemed to turn against me. I was surrounded by plots and intrigues and spies. I could trust no one—not even members of my own family—not even my own sons. Alexander and Aristobulus, my

sons by Mariamne, plotted against me and had to be executed.

And then on top of all that, these astrologers came to Jerusalem, seeking one born King of the Jews! You can understand why I was rather suspicious! Was it some sort of elaborate plot? Or were they harmless religious freaks? That is what I had to decide.

They said the reason they came was because they had seen a star in the East that indicated in their science that a great King was to be born—and born among the Jews. They had heard of such a divine King, and so they had come to worship him.

So I called my advisors—among them the chief priests and experts in the religious writings. One of them pointed out that this could be a reference to prophecies concerning a great King of the family of David, whom they referred to as the Messiah or Christ, the Anointed King.

They got very excited at the reference to a star, as in one of the Books of Moses, the prophet Balaam predicted that:

A star will come from Jacob; a sceptre will rise from Israel... Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be defeated, but Israel will become strong.

The reference to Edom immediately aroused my suspicions. Did this mean they were looking for some

king to come who would replace me, because I was not descended from David?

What ingratitude they all show, after all I have done! I built up this city of Jerusalem as it is today. Not only my great palace and the Fortress of Antonia, but also I rebuilt Solomon's Temple and made it one of the wonders of the world. You would think this would have earned me some respect, if not love, from my people. Instead they blamed me for building pagan temples elsewhere, but they were temples dedicated to Augustus—the people don't understand that these things are political necessities.

There were even two of their religious teachers, called Judas and Matthaïas, who incited their disciples to cut down and destroy a fabulous golden eagle I had placed over the great gate of the Temple. They alleged it was an idol forbidden by the law. Of course it was no such thing. I had dedicated it to the Temple. It was mere coincidence that the eagle was also on the standard of the Roman legions. For such impiety, I had these men burned alive. And that very night there was a strange portent in the heavens—the moon turned to blood. Of course my enemies said it was a sign of God's anger against me, not only for burning these men, but also for ridding the earth of their beloved Hasmonean kings and all their family.

All of this has played havoc with my health, which has not been good for some time. My insides are burning. I have a voracious appetite, but nothing seems to bring relief. My feet and belly are swollen. I suffer shortness of breath and convulsions, together with various other unmentionable afflictions.

Nevertheless, in spite of my weakness, I paid particular attention to this matter these astrologers had raised. It could be a matter of the gravest consequence. I asked our learned men all about this Messiah. And they were pleased to oblige. I think they would have gone on all day unless I'd stopped them!

They said this king was to be a descendent of Abraham, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, in the family of David. (Now, no king of David's family had ruled in Israel for hundreds of years. The family had descended into obscurity, if it existed at all.) They said his would be an everlasting kingdom. They quoted the words from the prophet Isaiah:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The peace of his government will never end. He will rule with justice on the throne of David for ever. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do it.

These were great words! Perhaps my kingdom would be like that. Perhaps it would last a thousand years. Perhaps I am this great King! Why not?

But I revealed none of my thoughts to those present. I wanted to find out more about their ideas about this rival king by whom they would supplant me.

Ostensibly to aid the astrologers in their search, I asked our experts where this King was to be born. To my surprise they had a definite answer—Bethlehem in Judea, and they quoted the prophet Micah:

Bethlehem, you're small among the villages of Judah, but out of you will come for me one who will rule Israel, whose origins are from all eternity.

I had to think carefully now as to how best to proceed. The trouble was, due to my ill health, I could not investigate myself, and I could trust no one else. In the end I decided to employ these astronomers, as they seemed genuine enough, if rather weird.

I got them to meet me privately and I plied them with many questions. Of particular interest to me (although I did not show that to them) was the exact time the star had appeared. For from that I could calculate how old this child was. This would be very useful when it came to dealing with him—if he existed!

I then told them to go and to make a careful search in Bethlehem until they found the child, and then immediately to report back to me, because I too wanted

to go and worship him, ill though I was. I explained that absolute secrecy was of the utmost importance, as there might be those who would harm the child, so the sooner he could be protected the better.

They seemed happy with this, and before they left they showed me the gifts they had brought for the child—gold, incense and myrrh. Gold for a king, they said; incense for he would also be a priest; and myrrh for mortal man. At this last my ears pricked up. So he would die? How could his kingdom last for ever, then?

When the astrologers left, I waited impatiently for them to return. One day passed. Two days. Then a whole week. I could stand it no longer. I confided in one of my military commanders, and asked him to make enquiries in Bethlehem.

He returned the same day to report he had scoured the whole area and there was no sign of any Eastern astrologers. I was furious! They had deliberately misled me. They were obviously part of some elaborate plot on the part of my enemies. But I would have the last laugh. There will be no child to rival me. Sometimes a ruler has to be ruthless. I ordered my commander to go to Bethlehem and kill all the male children under two years old.

So that is the end of that. All those fancy notions of a kingdom of peace that would last forever will come to nothing. Even the name of this child will never be

known. Who will remember him in two thousand years' time? But the name of Herod the Great will live for ever.

What's that? Escaped, you say? Escaped - how? Warned in a dream! Escaped to where? Egypt! Egypt!

Ah! My body is racked with pain. My head is on fire. My heart fails. I am dying. But one thing I will ensure—that the nation shall mourn my passing. Gather all the principal men of the nation, and when I die, kill them! Kill them all, do you hear? So all the nation will mourn my death!

“Unto us a child is born.” Who is this child that has escaped me? No one else ever escaped me—not even my own sons, or my dear, dear Mariamne.

In this one thing I may have failed, but it will never be said of me that I failed of courage to protect my kingdom. I am King here! I am Herod the Great!

Matthew 2