



¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, ¹⁸ In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. (Matthew 2:16-18)

Stephen was the first martyr to die during the New Testament Church era, and many prophets died in their preaching of His coming; but there were many innocents of Bethlehem who died by the sword in the stead of baby Jesus. You will observe that the wicked king, Herod, gave order to kill every child of two years of age and below. The reason for this may be deduced from the story of the visitation of the Wise Men from the East. *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (Matt 2:1-2)* These men followed the Star that presumably appeared at Jesus' birth. They traveled a great distance over deserts, mountains and rivers (more than 1100 miles by camel) to reach Jerusalem. It may be assumed that they traveled months is not more than a year on their journey. They did not come to the stable as is depicted in many nativity scenes for Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were already quartered in a permanent dwelling by the time the Wise Men arrived. Thusly, *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him. (Matt 2:11)*

So how do we deduce the reason for Herod ordering all children of two years age and under to be martyred? By the very text we learn Herod diligently inquired of two points: 1) Where was the child born? and, 2) When did the Star appear to the Wise Men - *Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. (Matt 2:7)* From the information garnered from the facts Herod learned in his inquiry, he determined to insure the death of baby Jesus by killing every child that could possibly be born during the interim from His birth to the coming of the Wise Men from across the far reaches of the East.

Imagine the mournful sorrow and dejection of the mothers of Bethlehem to witness the brutal murder of their own little children by the heartless soldiers of Herod! The scene was well prophesied in Jeremiah 31:15, and reinforced in the present Gospel, Matthew 2:17-18. *¹⁵ Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because*

they were not. (Jer 31:15) and ¹⁷Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, ¹⁸In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. (Matt 2:17-18)

Not more than a few years ago, I would have considered this account of brutality almost beyond imagination for cruelty, but do we not see the wicked arm of Satan being acted out in modern-day Islam. Rachel died in childbirth to Benjamin near Bethlehem, in the region of Ramah, where she was buried.

Perhaps our pity should be more directed to Herod and his bloody soldiers than to these innocent infants. They bear no responsibility for sin, but the soldiers own a share ten to the one-hundredth power in it. How did God view the eternal destiny of these innocents? Let us read the first-hand account from Jeremiah: ¹⁶Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷And there is hope in thine end, saith the LORD, that thy children shall come again to their own border. (Jer 31:16-17) This squares quite favorable with the words of the King, David, when the child of Bathsheba, born out of an adulterous relationship, died. David immediately ceased his mourning, bathed and oiled his head, and had a feast. ²¹Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. ²²And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? ²³But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? ***I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.*** (2 Sam 12:21-23)

Our Promised Land is not some tawdry little piece of real estate in Canaan, but on high in the Paradise of God. So is that to which all innocents journey.

Without the restraint of God's moral law, man is wicked, and his heart imagines evil and shameful things upon which he acts, as did Herod.

Once the Wise Men departed from Bethlehem and started their return journey home, they did not return to Herod having been warned by God in a dream to return another way. When they did not return to Herod and inform him of the child's precise location, he was furious and ordered the massacre. Joseph, in the meantime, had been warned of God by an angel in his dream to take the child and flee into Egypt. This Joseph did, and sojourned in Egypt until the wicked Herod was dead.

Herod, though king of the Jews, was not of pure descent. He was of mixed blood - Jewish and Idumaean. He was not faithful to the law of Moses to include food laws. Many suggest that Herod died of trichinosis - Trichinosis is caused by the larvae of the Trichinella ringworm. The parasitic worm is often found in animals that eat meat. One of the most common carriers of the parasite are pigs. Here is what the historian, Josephus has to say about Herod's death: *Herod the Great died of a painful and debilitating disease that caused breathing problems, convulsions, rotting of his body, and worms.* May I venture to conclude such a death served him right; however, death was only the beginning of a far worse and eternal torment.

Our Church Calendar sets aside a day to commemorate the slaughter of innocents at Bethlehem, the third day after Christmas we observe Day of Holy Innocents.