

Massacre of the Innocents

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The **Massacre of the Innocents** is an episode of infanticide by the King of Judea, Herod the Great, that appears in the Gospel of Matthew 2:16-18 (<http://bibref.hebtools.com?book=%20Matthew&verse=2:16-18&src=!>) . The author, traditionally Matthew the Evangelist, reports that Herod ordered the execution of all young male children in the village of Bethlehem, so as to avoid the loss of his throne to a newborn *King of the Jews* whose birth had been announced to him by the Magi. The incident, like others in Matthew, is described as the fulfillment of a passage in the Old Testament read as prophecy,^[1] in this case a reading of Jeremiah: "Then was fulfilled that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet, saying, A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children."^[2]

The infants, known in the Church as the **Holy Innocents**, have been claimed as the first Christian martyrs. Traditional accounts number them at more than ten thousand, but more conservative historicizing estimates put their number in the low dozens,^[3] but there is dispute over whether the story is historical.



The Holy Innocents by Giotto di Bondone.

Contents

- 1 Biblical account
- 2 Historicity
- 3 Later accounts
- 4 In the arts
- 5 Feast days
- 6 Notes
- 7 References
- 8 External links

Biblical account

In Matthew's account, magi from the east go to Judea in search of the newborn king of the Jews, having "seen his star in the east". They are directed to Bethlehem, and Herod asks them to let him know who this king is when they find him. They find Jesus and honor him, but an angel tells them not to alert Herod, and they return home by another way.

The Massacre of the Innocents is at Matthew 2:16-18 (<http://bibref.hebtools.com/?book=%20Matthew&verse=2:16-18&src=NIV>), although the preceding verses form the context:

When [the Magi] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."^[4] When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."^[2]

Matthew's purpose is theological: he presents Jesus as the Messiah, and the Massacre of the Innocents as the fulfillment of passages in Hosea, referring to the exodus, and Jeremiah, to the Babylonian exile.^[5] Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pp.104-121.</ref> Raymond Brown sees the story as patterned on the Exodus story of the killing of the Hebrew firstborn by Pharaoh and the birth of Moses.^[6]

Historicity

Herod the Great (73 BC – 4 BC) was an Idumean (or Edomite) whom the Romans



10th century illuminated manuscript

established as the king of Idumea, Judea, Samaria and Galilee. Matthew's account is consistent with the character of Herod, who was ruthless in defense of his power and notorious for his brutality. However, the massacre is not mentioned in Luke's gospel or by Josephus.

Josephus records several other examples of Herod's willingness to commit such acts to protect his power, noting that he "never stopped avenging and punishing every day those who had chosen to be of the party of his enemies."^[7] Some historians take the silence of Josephus as evidence that the massacre did not take place. Vermes and Sanders regard the story as creative hagiography,^[8] and Maier wrote in 1998 that "most recent biographies of Herod the Great deny it entirely".^[9]

Eisenman argues that the story may have its origins in Herod's murder of his own sons, an act which made a deep impression at the time and was recorded by Josephus as well as in the 1st century Jewish apocryphal work, the Assumption of Moses, where it is cast as a prophecy: *An insolent king will succeed [the Hasmonean priests]... he will slay all the young.*^[10]

"Here Herod really did kill all the Jewish children who sought to replace him, as Matthew 2:17 would have it, but these were rather his own children with Maccabean blood!"^[11]

Arguing for historicity France argues that Josephus would be unlikely to record the massacre:

“on the scale of atrocities known to have been perpetrated by Herod ... this would register very low ... The murder of a few infants in a small village [is] not on a scale to match the more spectacular assassinations recorded by Josephus”.

France argues against the incident being derived from the Moses infancy narrative as that concerns newborn children and does not explain the reference to infants under two years of age, and says that the Jeremiah passage is “an editorial comment on a traditional story, not its source”. He concludes that the incident is likely to be, and that at the very least Matthew believed it to be, "an actual event".^[12]

Later accounts

The story's first appearance in any source other than Matthew is in the 2nd-century apocryphal Protoevangelium of James of c.150 AD, which excludes the Flight into Egypt

and switches the attention of the story to the infant John the Baptist:

"And when Herod knew that he had been mocked by the Magi, in a rage he sent murderers, saying to them: Slay the children from two years old and under. And Mary, having heard that the children were being killed, was afraid, and took the infant and swaddled Him, and put Him into an ox-stall. And Elizabeth, having heard that they were searching for John, took him and went up into the hill-country, and kept looking where to conceal him. And there was no place of concealment. And Elizabeth, groaning with a loud voice, says: O mountain of God, receive mother and child. And immediately the mountain was cleft, and received her. And a light shone about them, for an angel of the Lord was with them, watching over them."^[13]

The first non-Christian reference to the massacre is recorded four centuries later by Macrobius (c. 395-423), who writes in his *Saturnalia*:

"When he [emperor Augustus] heard that among the boys in Syria under two years old whom Herod, king of the Jews, had ordered to kill, his own son was also killed, he said: it is better to be Herod's pig, than his son."^[14]

Macrobius' statement shows that the tradition of the massacre of the innocents had become firmly established in the culture at large, for the fact that Christianity is not mentioned in any of his writings, despite the predominance it was asserting in every aspect of contemporary Roman life, coupled with his vigorous interest in pagan rituals, leaves scholars in no doubt as to his pagan religion.

The story assumed an important place in later Christian tradition; Byzantine liturgy estimated 14,000 Holy Innocents while an early Syrian list of saints stated the number at 64,000. Coptic sources raise the number to 144,000 and place the event on 29 December.^[15] Taking the narrative literally and judging from the estimated population of Bethlehem, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1910) more soberly suggested that these numbers were inflated, and that probably only between six and twenty children were killed in the town, with a dozen or so more in the surrounding areas.^[3]



The Massacre of the Innocents at Bethlehem, by Matteo di Giovanni

In the arts

Medieval liturgical drama recounted Biblical events, including Herod's slaughter of the innocents. *The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors*, performed in Coventry, England, included a haunting song about the episode, now known as the Coventry Carol. The *Ordo Rachelis* tradition of four plays includes the Flight into Egypt, Herod's succession by Archelaus, the return from Egypt, as well as the Massacre all centred on Rachel weeping in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. These events were likewise in one of the Medieval N-Town Plays.



Cornelis van Haarlem, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1590, Rijksmuseum

The theme of the "Massacre of the Innocents" has provided artists of many nationalities with opportunities to compose complicated depictions of massed bodies in violent action. It was an alternative to the *Flight into Egypt* in cycles of the Life of the Virgin. It decreased in popularity in Gothic art, but revived in the larger works of the Renaissance, when artists took inspiration for their "Massacres" from Roman reliefs of the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs to the extent that they showed the figures heroically nude.^[16] The horrific subject matter of the Massacre of the Innocents also provided a comparison of ancient brutalities with early modern ones during the period of religious wars that followed the Reformation - Breugel's versions show the soldiers carrying banners with the Habsburg double-headed eagle (often used at the time for Ancient Roman soldiers).

The 1590 version by Cornelis van Haarlem also seems to reflect the violence of the Dutch Revolt. Guido Reni's early (1611) *Massacre of the Innocents*, in an unusual vertical format, is at Bologna.^[17] The Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens painted the theme more than once. One version, now in Munich, was engraved and reproduced as a painting as far away as colonial Peru.^[18] Another, his grand *Massacre of the Innocents* is now at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. The French painter Nicolas Poussin painted *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1634) at the height of the Thirty Years' War.



Rubens' *Massacre of the Innocents*, Toronto

The Childermass, after a traditional name for the Feast of the Holy Innocents, is the opening novel of Wyndham Lewis's trilogy *The Human Age*. In the novel *The Fall (La Chute)* by Albert Camus, the incident is argued by the main character to be the reason why Jesus chose to let himself be crucified—as he escaped the punishment intended for him while many others died, he felt responsible and died in guilt. A similar interpretation is given in José Saramago's controversial *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, but there attributed to Joseph, Jesus' father, rather than to Jesus himself. As depicted by Saramago, Joseph knew of Herod's intention to massacre the children of Bethlehem, but failed to warn the townspeople and chose only to save his own child. Guilt-ridden ever after, Joseph finally expiates his sin by letting himself be crucified (an event not narrated in the New Testament).

The Massacre is the opening plot used in the 2006 movie *The Nativity Story*.

Feast days

The commemoration of the massacre of these "Holy Innocents"—considered by some Christians as the first martyrs for Christ^[19]—first appears as a feast of the western church in the Leonine Sacramentary, dating from about 485. The earliest commemorations were connected with the Feast of the Epiphany, 6 January: Prudentius mentions the Innocents in his hymn on the Epiphany. Leo in his homilies on the Epiphany speaks of the Innocents. Fulgentius of Ruspe (6th century) gives a homily *De Epiphania, deque Innocentum nece et muneribus magorum*.^[20]



Triumph of the Innocents by William Holman Hunt

Today, the date of **Holy Innocents' Day**, also called **Childermas** or **Children's Mass**, varies. 27 December is the date for West Syrians (Syriac Orthodox Church, Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, and Maronite Church) and East Syrians (Chaldeans and Syro-Malabar Catholic Church). 28 December is the date in the Church of England, the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church (in which violet vestments were worn before 1961, instead of red, the normal liturgical colour for celebrating martyrs). The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates the feast on 29 December.

In Spain and Hispanic America, December 28 is a day for pranks, equivalent to April Fool's Day in many countries. Pranks are known as *inocentadas* and their victims are

called *inocentes*, or alternatively, the pranksters are the "inocentes" and the victims should not be angry at them, since they could not have committed any *sin*. Various Catholic countries had a tradition (no longer widely observed) of role reversal between children and their adult educators, including boy bishops, perhaps a Christianized version of the Roman annual feast of the Saturnalia (when even slaves played 'masters' for a day). In some cultures it is said to be an unlucky day, when no new project should be started.

In addition, there was a medieval custom of refraining where possible from work on the day of the week on which the feast of "Innocents Day" had fallen for the whole of the following year until the next Innocents Day. This was presumably mainly observed by the better-off. Philippe de Commines, the minister of King Louis XI of France tells in his memoirs how the king observed this custom, and describes the trepidation he felt when he had to inform the king of an emergency on the day.^[21]

Notes

- ^a **(Matthew 2:17** - "Then was fulfilled that being declared by Jeremiah the prophet so-saying.")
- ^{a b} Compare Jeremiah 31:15 (<http://bibref.hebtools.com?book=%20Jeremiah&verse=31:15&src=NIV>) . See also Jesus and Messianic prophecy#Jeremiah 31:15
- ^{a b} Holy Innocents (<http://ww.newadvent.org/cathen/07419a.htm>) in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: "The Greek Liturgy asserts that Herod killed 14,000 boys (*ton hagion id chiliadon Nepion*), the Syrians speak of 64,000, many medieval authors of 144,000, according to Apocalypse 14:3. Writers who accept the historicity of the episode reduce the number considerably, since Bethlehem was a rather small town. Joseph Knabenbauer brings it down to fifteen or twenty (Evang. S. Matt., I, 104), August Bisping to ten or twelve (Evang. S. Matt.), Lorenz Kellner to about six (Christus und seine Apostel, Freiburg, 1908); cf. "Anzeiger kath. Geistlichk. Deutschl.", 15 Febr., 1909, p. 32."
- ^a Compare Hosea 11:1 (<http://bibref.hebtools.com?book=%20Hosea&verse=11:1&src=HE>) . See also Jesus and Messianic prophecy#Hosea 11:1
- ^a Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 2nd Ed. Palo Alto: Mayfield, 1985, p.274
- ^a Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pp.104-121.
- ^a Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XV (at Wikisource).
- ^a Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend*, London, Penguin, 2006, p22; E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, Penguin, 1993, p.85
- ^a Paul L. Maier, "Herod and the Infants of Bethlehem", in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos II*, Mercer University Press (1998), p.170
- ^a Assumption of Moses 6:2–6
- ^a Robert Eisenman, *James The Brother of Jesus*, 1997, I.3 "Romans, Herodians and Jewish sects," p.49; see also E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*,

- 1993, p.87-88
12. ^ R T France “The Gospel of Matthew” 2007 NICNT
 13. ^ Protoevangelium of James (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm>) at newadvent.org.
 14. ^ "Cum audisset inter pueros quos in Syria Herodes rex Iudaeorum intra bimatum iussit interfici filium quoque eius occisum, ait: Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium," (Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, book II, chapter IV:11 (http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Macrobius/Saturnalia/2*.html)).
 15. ^ E. Porcher, ed. and tr., *Histoire d'Isaac, patriarche Jacobite d'Alexandrie de 686 à 689, écrite par Mina, évêque de Pchati*, volume 11. 1915. Texts in Arabic, Greek and Syriac (<http://www.archive.org/details/patrologiaorient11pariuoft>) , p. 526.
 16. ^ Getty Collection (<http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/o448.html>)
 17. ^ Reni's painting at the Web Gallery of Art (<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/r/reni/1/innocent.html>)
 18. ^ The *Massacre of the Innocents* in Cuzco Cathedral is clearly influenced by Rubens. See *CODART Courant* (<http://www.codart.nl/Downloads/Courants/courant7.pdf>) , Dec 2003, 12. (2.5 MB pdf download)
 19. ^ Sir William Smith and Samuel Cheetham , *A dictionary of Christian antiquities*, s.v. "Innocents, Festival of the" notes Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* iii.16.4) and Cyprian (*Epistle* 56) at the head of an extensive list.
 20. ^ Prudentius, Leo and Fulgentius are noted in Sir William Smith and Samuel Cheetham, *A dictionary of Christian antiquities*, s.v. "Innocents, Festival of the".
 21. ^ Philippe de Commines trans. Michael Jones, *Memoirs*, pp. 253-4, 1972, Penguin, ISBN 0140442642

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External links

- *Catholic Encyclopedia*: "Holy Innocents" (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07419a.htm>)
- Images of the "Massacre of the Innocents" (http://www.textweek.com/art/massacre_of_innocents.htm)
- The Holy Martyred 14,000 Infants (<http://www.holytrinityorthodox.com/calendar/los/December/29-01.htm>)

Massacre of the Innocents Life of Jesus: The Nativity		
Preceded by Flight into Egypt	New Testament Events	Death of Herod, further succeeded by Boy Jesus at Jerusalem

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