

Christmas Day, 2014

The 70 year old man sitting at the high seat at the head of the table smiled when he saw the young man coming to clear his plate – though even a smile caused a sharp pain in his side and a fit of coughing.

He was a handsome young man, of the kind he remembered from his two trips to Rome, but unfailing cheerful and evidently uninterested in the whispers and bits of gossip to be heard up and down the massive table. He served efficiently, deftly collecting plates as they were finished and filling wine goblets the moment before the last drop was drained.

King Herod looked at the boy, envious of his youth. A second smile crossed his lips, as painful as the first as he mused: perhaps this child is one of my sons. I wonder who his mother might have been? That niece of mine, what was her name? Could he be her son? That would explain why he had such a coveted position at the King's table at such a young age.

It would also explain why the young man was not at all concerned about rumors of power and whose seat was assigned higher or lower at the table at each feast. The boy wanted nothing more than he had – perhaps the only one in the room so unencumbered. He made no one wait for service, and poured no more nor less into anyone's cup.

Herod's mind drifted away from the unending stream of ill-conceived advice from the courtiers on either side of him. Chances are, one or the other or perhaps both would need to be executed for high treason against Judea or even Rome before the new moon.

Instead, he thought back to the sordid events of his family and their collective unfaithfulness – at least that's what he thought it was. Of his eight official wives, he had ... was it two, or only one ... executed. Others he simply abandoned after they failed to please him.

Of his nine sons, three he had executed because he feared they were plotting against him. His motivation was misguided but not inaccurate, since they probably all were, as were at least one mother-in-law and a High Priest of the Temple Herod was already rebuilding, who met similar fates.

And then there was that nephew who showed up for a garden party in his self-proclaimed “royal armor.” A nod to a nearby soldier and the nephew found himself at the bottom of the reflecting pool, eyes staring blankly, drowned in his own naiveté.

But three were good sons and faithful, each of whom had developed enough political savvy to handle at least a share in the leadership of his Kingdom.

When Herod’s decision to support Octavian against Mark Antony proved fortuitous, he was rewarded with the title, King of Judea. Herod was the King of the Jews.

But he knew that he would be the last of them. None of his sons had the skill to take over his entire kingdom, nor would Caesar Augustus allow it. The Romans held fast to a principle: Divide to conquer. Upon the demise – in whatever way – of a King, his kingdom would be broken into smaller bits: some were ethnarchies, some were tetrarchies – whatever terminology seemed to work locally. These smaller bits would become more dependent on Rome for protection, and therefore more willing to buy into the political economy that Rome offered.

Herod – knowing that the end of his life was at hand – had just completed his last will and testimony, where he recommended to Augustus that his three capable sons be given small shares and that a Roman Procurator be assigned to manage the whole system. This was the plan he had proposed to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council of Pharisees, Sadducees and Rabbis, suggesting that it was the only way for Judea to retain some sense of self governance.

What the Sanhedrin did not know was that Herod’s will also called for the arrest and imprisonment of a rabbi and an elder from every village and region in his kingdom, to be locked up in Jerusalem. His will ordered that they immediately be executed by his personal guard to guarantee that there would be mourning and wailing in Judea at the time of his death – even if not, exactly, caused by his death.

Deep in this reverie, Herod was brought back to the moment by a voice calling on him.

“My Lord King? My Lord King? May I ask you a question?”

Any other servant or even lieutenant in his army that interrupted him like that would have been immediately flogged on the spot for punishment, as a warning to others, and for the amusement of his guests.

But Herod liked this boy. His cousin? What was her name? Maybe he was her son. There were so many like that.

“A question? What question?”

“My Lord King: many of your guests are talking about the *Shekinah*? I have never heard of it before? What is it?”

Herod felt a great groan in his soul, ravaging the deep pains he bore that were of his spirit, rather than the more recent ones of his flesh.

“My boy...” Herod paused briefly as he heard himself say those words.

“My boy, it would be better to ask that question of a scribe than of me. I do not pretend to know every detail of scripture. That’s what they do for me!”

“My Lord King, they say it is like a great light that comes from heaven? Is it true? And there is a new star in the sky. Is that where it’s from?”

“They call you ‘Great,’ have you seen it?”

Herod struggled to recall what he had been taught. *Shekinah*. It was the light at the very beginning of creation.

It burst into the rainbow that Noah saw when the ark was safely ashore.

Moses spoke with God in that light, and his face was so bright no one else could bear to look at him without a bag over his face.

Elijah saw that light as he was taken up into heaven in the fiery chariot.

Isaiah said that the light called to him in the Holy of Holies, amid the seraphim flitting about, who then cleansed his tongue and sent him forth to speak.

“My boy, I believe it is something like that. Now, attend to your duties!”

Moments later, Herod stood and waved his hands at his guests, bidding them to stay and enjoy the feast.

They all knew what he was increasingly recognizing, that his body was racked by pain even as his soul and spirit always had been. Herod in his way, and everyone else present in their ways, were glad to see him retire from the room.

A guard escorted him to his new bedroom, on the same floor as the banquet hall so he needn't go up and down stairs. Unlike his master suite – which faced west for him to see the vesper light on his new Temple construction every evening, this room faced east, and his windows welcomed both the dawn and the rising moon in its seasons.

It also let the other light in. The star light. The light everyone was talking about.

Herod lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. He could still see the new light.

How long ago was it? Certainly not quite a year ago, but maybe three seasons?

He lay down one night and shut his eyes for sleep. And there was the light.

At first, he could only see it with his eyes closed. But as it grew brighter in his imagination, he began to think he saw it in the sky as a tiny star where none had been before.

And in these last days, it was clear that others were seeing it too, and wondering what it was and whether it meant anything.

Meanwhile, every day as the star shone brighter, Herod's body seemed to waste further away. There was no hiding the lump on the side of his throat, though no one dared speak of it. His hunger abated to the point that he only nibbled at a few things each day. And he refused most drink fearing the burning he felt at its release.

He could not remember a night's sleep without interruption by pain or by nightmare.

Long ago he dreamed of his great buildings, of what he had created and what he wanted to create. When the light first appeared in his imagination, he dreamt of his family, of his unfaithful sons and ruthless wives and the violence he perpetrated upon them.

The light seemed to accuse him. And the brighter it got, the more guilt he saw laying before him.

Shekinah. The light of God's majesty. It was calling to Herod, not with the voice of revelation and prophecy, but with the voice of condemnation for years of injustice and oppression.

Herod lay on his bed, night after night, and eyes opened or closed, and saw this *Shekinah* glory surround him and enclose him.

Well before dawn on that winter's morning, a watchman stepped into his chamber with news.

"My Lord King. We have word from Gudapharasa, from Kandahar. He begs leave to enter your kingdom with his companions and to greet you and your new son." The guard held up a sealed letter.

Herod screwed up his face into a painful scowl, regardless of the pangs of pain it sent to his side and back and neck.

"I have no new son, and I have no need of old Gaspar's spells and potions and his gloomy predictions. They don't take away my pain anymore and he hasn't been right about the Romans in years.

"Caesar has agreed, there will be no new King of the Jews once I am gone."

Herod grabbed the letter, opened it and read it to himself.

"My Lord King of the Jews: We rejoice at the heavenly announcement of the birth of a new King of the Jews and wish to visit and pay homage to him and then consult with you. By your leave we will continue to follow ..."

Herod paused at the next word, so unexpected from the order of the Magi.

“By your leave we will continue to follow the *Shekinah* that we have seen from the east.”

Revised 12-27-2014

© 2014 Mark Gatzka