

KILLING JESUS

BILL O'REILLY AND MARTIN DUGARD

CHAPTER ONE

BETHLEHEM, JUDEA

MARCH, 5 B.C.

MORNING

The child with thirty- six years to live is being hunted.

Heavily armed soldiers from the capital city of Jerusalem are marching to this small town, intent on finding and killing the baby boy. They are a mixed- race group of foreign mercenaries from Greece, Gaul, and Syria. The child's name, unknown to them, is Jesus, and his only crime is that some believe he will be the next king of the Jewish people. The current monarch, a dying half- Jewish, half- Arab despot named Herod, is so intent on ensuring the baby's death that his army has been ordered to murder every male child under the age of two years in Bethlehem. None of the soldiers knows what the child's mother and father look like, or the precise location of his home, thus the need to kill every baby boy in the small town and surrounding area. This alone will guarantee the extermination of the potential king.

It is springtime in Judea, the peak of lambing season. The rolling dirt road takes the army past thick groves of olive trees and shepherds tending their flocks. The soldiers' feet are clad in sandals, their legs are bare, and they wear the skirtlike *pteruges* to cover their loins. The young men sweat profusely beneath the plates of armor on their chests and the tinned bronze attic helmets that cover the tops of their heads and the sides of their faces.

The soldiers are well aware of Herod's notorious cruelty and his penchant for killing anyone who would try to threaten his throne. But there is no moral debate about the right or wrong of slaughtering infants. Nor do the soldiers question whether they will have the nerve to rip a screaming child from his mother's arms and carry out the execution. When the time comes, they will follow orders and do their jobs— or risk being immediately killed for insubordination.

The sword's blade is how they plan to dispatch the babies. All soldiers are armed with the Judean version of the razor- sharp *pugio* and *gladius* preferred by the Roman legions, and they wear their weapons attached to the waist. Their method of murder, however, will not be restricted to the dagger or sword.

Should they wish, Herod's soldiers can also use a skull-crushing stone, hurl the baby boys off a cliff en masse, or just wrap their fists around the infants' windpipes and strangle them. The cause of death is not important. What matters most is one simple fact: king of the Jews or not, the infant must die.

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, King Herod gazes out a palace window toward Bethlehem, anxiously awaiting confirmation of the slaughter. In the cobbled streets below him, the Roman-appointed king sees the crowded bazaars, where vendors sell everything from water and dates to tourist trinkets and roast lamb. The walled city of some eighty thousand residents packed into less than a single square mile is a crossroads of the eastern Mediterranean. With one sweep of his eyes, Herod can see visiting Galilean peasants, brightly dressed Syrian women, and the foreign soldiers he pays to wage his battles. These men fight extremely well but are not Jews and don't speak a word of the Hebrew language.

Herod sighs. Back in his youth, he would never have stood in a window and worried about the future. A great king and warrior such as he would have ordered that a bridle be thrown over his favorite white charger so that he might gallop to Bethlehem and murder the child himself. But Herod is now a man of sixty-nine. His massive girth and incessant medical problems make it physically impossible for him to leave his palace, let alone mount a horse. His bloated face is wreathed in a beard that extends from the bottom of his chin to just below his Adam's apple. On this day, he wears a royal purple Roman-style mantle over a short-sleeved white silk tunic. Normally Herod prefers soft leather leggings that have been stained purple. But today even the gentlest bristle of fabric against his inflamed big toe is enough to make him cry out in pain. So it is that Herod, the most powerful man in Judea, hobbles through the palace barefoot.

But gout is the least of Herod's ailments. The king of the Jews, as this nonpracticing convert to the religion likes to be known, is also suffering from lung disease, kidney problems, worms, a heart condition, sexually transmitted diseases, and a horrible version of Herod the Great overseeing the Temple expansion gangrene that has caused his genitals to rot, turn black, and become infested with maggots—thus the inability to sit astride, let alone ride, a horse.

Herod has learned how to live with his aches and pains, but these warnings about a new king in Bethlehem are scaring him. Since the Romans first installed him as ruler of Judea more than thirty years ago, Herod has foiled countless plots and waged many wars to remain king. He has murdered anyone who would try to steal his throne—and even executed those only suspected of plotting against him. His power over the locals is absolute. No one in Judea is safe from Herod's executions. He has ordered deaths by

hanging, stoning, strangulation, fire, the sword, live animals, serpents, beating, and a type of public suicide in which victims are forced to hurl themselves off tall buildings. The lone form of execution in which he has not engaged is crucifixion, that most slow and humiliating of deaths, where a man is flogged and then nailed naked upon a wooden cross in plain sight of the city walls. The Romans are the masters of this brutal art, and they almost exclusively practice it. Herod would not dream of enraging his superiors in Rome by appropriating their favorite form of murder.

Herod has ten wives— or had, before he executed the fiery Mariamme for allegedly plotting against him. For good measure, he also ordered the deaths of her mother and of his sons Alexander and Aristobulus. Within a year, he will murder a third male offspring. Small wonder that the great Roman emperor Caesar Augustus was rumored to have openly commented, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than to be his son.”

But this newest threat, though it comes from a mere infant, is the most dangerous of all. For centuries, Jewish prophets have predicted the coming of a new king to rule their people. They have prophesied five specific occurrences that will take place to confirm the new Messiah’s birth.

The first is that a great star will rise.

The second is that the baby will be born in Bethlehem, the small town where the great King David was born a thousand years before.

The third prophecy is that the child must also be a direct descendant of David, a fact that can easily be proven by the temple’s meticulous genealogical records.

Fourth, powerful men will travel from afar to worship him.

Finally, the child’s mother must be a virgin.

What troubles Herod most deeply is that he knows the first two of these to be true.

He might be even more distressed to learn that all five have come to pass. The child is from the line of David; powerful men have traveled from afar to worship him; and his teenage mother, Mary, swears that she is still a virgin, despite her pregnancy.

He also does not know that the child's name is Yeshua ben Joseph— or Jesus, meaning “the Lord is salvation.”

Herod first learns about Jesus from the travelers who have come to worship the baby. These men are called Magi, and they stop at his castle to pay their respects en route to paying homage to Jesus. They are astronomers, diviners, and wise men who also study the world's great religious texts. Among these books is the Tanakh, a collection of history, prophecy, poetry, and songs telling the story of the Jewish people. The wealthy foreigners travel almost a thousand miles over rugged desert, following an extraordinarily bright star that shines in the sky each morning before dawn. “Where is the one who has been born the king of the Jews?” they demand to know upon their arrival in Herod's court. “We see his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

Amazingly, the Magi carry treasure chests filled with gold and the sweet- smelling tree resins myrrh and frankincense. These priests are learned, studious men. Theirs is a life of analysis and reason. Herod can conclude only that either the Magi are out of their minds for risking the theft of such a great fortune in the vast and lawless Parthian desert or they truly believe this child to be the new king.

A furious Herod summons his religious advisers. As a secular man, he knows little about Jewish prophecies. Herod insists that these high priests and teachers of religious law tell him exactly where to find the new king.

The answer comes immediately: “In Bethlehem, in Judea.”

The teachers whom Herod is interrogating are humble men. They wear simple white linen caps and robes. But the bearded Temple priests are a far different story. They dress elaborately, in white- and- blue linen caps with a gold band on the brow, and blue robes adorned in bright tassels and bells. Over their robes they wear capes and purses adorned in gold and precious stones. On a normal day their garb distinguishes them from the people of Jerusalem. But even in his dissipated state, King Herod is the most regal man in the room by far. He continues to hector the teachers and priests. “Where is this so- called king of the Jews?”

“Bethlehem, in the land of Judah.” They quote verbatim from the words of the prophet Micah, some seven centuries earlier. “Out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

Herod sends the Magi on their way. His parting royal decree is that they locate the infant, then return to Jerusalem and tell Herod the child's precise location so that he can venture forth to worship this new king himself.

The Magi see through this deceit. They never come back. So it is that time passes and Herod realizes he must take action. From the windows of his fortress palace, he can see all of Jerusalem. To his left rises the great Temple, the most important and sacred building in all Judea. Perched atop a massive stone platform that gives it the appearance of a citadel rather than a simple place of worship, the Temple is a physical embodiment of the Jewish people and their ancient faith. The Temple was first built by Solomon in the tenth century b.c. It was leveled by the Babylonians in 586 b.c., and then the Second Temple was built by Zerubbabel and others under the Persians nearly seventy years later. Herod recently renovated the entire complex and expanded the Temple's size to epic proportions, making it far larger than that of Solomon's. The Temple and its courts are now a symbol not just of Judaism but of the evil king himself.

So it is ironic, as Herod frets and gazes toward Bethlehem, that Jesus and his parents have already traveled to Jerusalem twice and paid visits to that great stone fortress, built atop the site where the Jewish patriarch Abraham nearly sacrificed his own son, Isaac. The first visit came eight days after Jesus's birth, so that he might be circumcised. There the child was formally named Jesus, in keeping with the prophecy. The second visit came when he was forty days old. The baby Jesus was brought to the Temple and formally presented to God, in keeping with the laws of the Jewish faith. His father, Joseph, a carpenter, dutifully purchased a pair of young turtledoves to be sacrificed in honor of this momentous occasion.

Something very strange and mystical occurred as Jesus and his parents entered the Temple on that day—something that hinted that Jesus might truly be a very special child. Two complete strangers, an old man and an old woman—neither of whom knew anything about this baby called Jesus or his fulfillment of prophecy—saw him from across the crowded place of worship and went to him. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were traveling in complete anonymity, avoiding anything that would draw attention to them. The old man's name was Simeon, and he was of the belief that he would not die until he laid eyes upon the new king of the Jews. Simeon asked if he might hold the newborn. Mary and Joseph agreed. As Simeon took Jesus into his arms, he offered a prayer to God, thanking him for the chance to see this new king with his own eyes. Then Simeon handed Jesus back to Mary with these words: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

At that very moment, a woman named Anna also approached. She was an eighty- four- year- old widowed prophetess who spent all her waking hours in the Temple, fasting and praying. Simeon's words were still ringing in Mary's and Joseph's ears when Anna stepped forth and also praised Jesus. She loudly thanked God for bringing this very special baby boy into the world. Then she made a most unusual claim, predicting to Mary and Joseph that their son would free Jerusalem from Roman rule.

Mary and Joseph marveled at Simeon's and Anna's words, flattered for the attention as all new parents would be, but also unsure what all this talk about swords and redemption truly meant. They finished their business and departed from the Temple into the bustling city of Jerusalem, both elated and fearful for the life their son might be destined to lead.