MATTHEW 2:16 AND JOSEPHUS’ PORTRAYALS OF HEROD

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Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem was a favourite scene in Italian Renaissance art.\(^1\) Giotto included it in the fresco cycle in the Scroveggi Chapel at Padua (1303-1305), and Giovanni Pisano depicted it on two sculpted pulpits made at Pistoia (1301-1311).\(^2\) In fact, Herod the Great has been consistently remembered as a monstrous ruler since the first century BCE. Josephus characterizes Herod as the most savage tyrant that had ever lived (War II 84). Matthew mentions Herod several times in his story about Jesus’ birth and the early travels of the Holy Family (1:18-2:23). He highlights Herod’s murderous behaviour in the tantalizingly brief story of the Massacre of the Infants (2:16). Photius combines traditions from Josephus and Matt. 2:16, and writes about Herod in one of his excerpts:

\[\ldots\text{ in his demented rage against him, Herod did not touch the Master, but made himself the assassin of numerous little children. In murderous cruelty it is said that he exceeded every other tyrant.}\]

Famous is Shakespeare’s brief quote “it out-Herods Herod” (Hamlet III 2), which hyperbolically highlights Herod’s violent rule and echoes Photius’ statement. Herod’s image as a brutal tyrant is also recycled in contemporary mass media. Mark Rich’s script for The Nativity Story (2006, director Catherine Hardwicke), a movie about Jesus’ mother Mary, presents the king as a vicious tyrant and a pawn of the Roman Empire, who was increasingly paranoid about his hold on power.

Scholars frequently support Herod’s image as a wicked tyrant.\(^4\) Recently, however, a few discordant voices have suggested that Jo-

\(^1\) I warmly thank Emma E. England, University of Amsterdam, for correcting my English and making helpful suggestions. The translations from Josephus’ Jewish War I-II and Jewish Antiquities derive from the translations by J. Sievers, A. Forte, S. Mason and myself for the Brill Josephus Project.

\(^2\) One is in the Church of St Andrea and the other in the Cathedral of Pistoia, further details in J. Lubbock, Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello, New Haven/London 2006, pp. 39-147.

Josephus’ and Matthew’s depictions of Herod do not do justice to the king and argue that Herod was, in fact, a capable ruler and one of Rome’s more successful client kings. This contribution will follow the lead of those scholars who assume that Josephus and Matthew have portrayed Herod the Great much more negatively than he would deserve according to ancient standards of rulership. First, I will briefly discuss all Herod references in Matthew 2 and then concentrate on Matt. 2:16, which, in my view, is part of a trajectory that constructs Herod the Great as a tyrant in increasingly negative terms. I consider Matthew’s passage unhistorical. Second, I will deal with selective passages from Josephus’ different portrayals of Herod in the Jewish War and the Jewish Antiquities. My final section combines my brief analysis of Josephus’ portraits of Herod with Matthew’s depiction of him, which will enable the location of Matthew’s passage in the ongoing chain of traditions that construct Herod as a wicked and murderous ruler.

1. Herod in Matthew 2

Matthew’s unique information about the birth of Jesus the Messiah in Matthew 1-2 focuses on the Who and How (chapter 1) as well as on

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