

10// THE HOLY INNOCENTS

The Innocents be called innocents for three reasons. First, by cause and reason of life, and by reason of pain, and by reason of innocence. By reason of life they be said innocents because they had an innocent life. They grieved nobody, neither God, by inobedience, ne their neighbours by untruth, ne by conceiving of any sin, and therefore it is said in the psalter: The innocents and righteous have joined them to me.

The innocents [were innocent] by their life and righteousness in the faith, by reason of pain, for they suffered death innocently and wrongly, whereof David saith: They have shed the blood of innocents.

[They were also innocent] by reason of innocency that they had, because that in this martyrdom they were baptized and made clean of the original sin, of which innocence is said in the psalter: Keep thou innocency of baptism and see equity of good works.

THE SLAYING OF THE INNOCENTS

Holy Church maketh feast of the Innocents which were put to death because of our Lord Jesu Christ. For Herod Ascalonita for to find and put to death our Lord which was born in Bethlehem, he did do slay all the children in Bethlehem and there about, from the age of two years and under unto one day, unto the sum of one hundred and forty-four thousand children.

THE THREE HERODS

For to understand which Herod it was that so cruelly did do put so many children to death, it is to wit that there were three Herods, and all three were cruel tyrants, and were in their time of great fame and much renowned for their great malice. The first was Herod Ascalonita: he reigned in Jerusalem when our Lord was born. The second was Herod Antipas, to whom Pilate sent Jesu Christ in the time of his passion, and he did do smite off St. John Baptist's head. The third was Herod Agrippa, which did do smite off St. James's head, said in Galicia, and set St. Peter in prison.

HEROD ASCALONITA

But now let us come to this first Herod that did do slay the innocent children. His father was named Antipater as *History Scholastic* saith, and was king of Idumea and paynim; he took a wife which was niece to the king of Arabia, on whom he had three sons and a daughter, of whom that one was named Herod Ascalonita. This Herod served so well to Julian the emperor of Rome that he gave to him the realm of Jerusalem. Then lost the Jews kings of their lineage, and then was showed the prophecy of the birth of our Lord.

Difficulties with His Sons

This Herod Ascalonita had six sons, Antipater, Alexander, Aristobulus, Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Philip. Of these children, Herod sent Alexander and Aristobulus to school to Rome, and Alexander became a wise and subtle advocate.

And when they were come from school again they began to enter into words against Herod their father, to whom he would leave his realm after him, wherefore their father was angry with them, and put tofore them Antipater their brother for to come to the realm. Upon that, incontinent they treated of the death of their father, wherefore their father enchased them away, and they went again to Rome and complained of their father to the emperor.

The Visit of the Three Kings and the Slaying of the Children

Anon after this came the three kings in to Jerusalem, and demanded where the king of Jews was, that was new born. Herod when he heard this, he had great dread lest any were born of the true lineage of the kings of the Jews, and that he were the very true heir, and of whom he might be chased out of the realm.

And when he had demanded of the three kings how they had had knowledge of the new king, they answered by a star being in the air, which was not naturally fixed in the heaven as the others were. Then he prayed them that they would return to him after that they had worshipped and seen this new king, that he might go after and worship the child. This said he fraudulently, for he thought to slay him.

After that the three kings were gone without bringing him any tidings, he thought that anon he would do slay all the children newly born in Bethlehem and thereabouts, among whom he thought to slay Jesu Christ. But his thought was empeshed and let, for the emperor sent to him a citation that he should come to Rome for to answer to the accusation that Aristobulus and Alexander, his two sons, had made against him, and therefore he durst not put then the children to death, to the end that he should not be accused of so cruel a deed with his other trespasses; so he was in going to Rome and abiding there, and in coming, more than half a year, and in that while Jesus was borne into Egypt.

When Herod came to Rome the emperor ordained that his sons should do him honour and obey him, and he should leave his realm after his death where it best pleased him.

Upon this, when he was come again, and felt himself confirmed of the realm, he was more hardy to slay the children than he had tofore thought. Then he sent into Bethlehem and did do slay all the children that were of the age of two years, because it was passed more than a year that the three kings had told him tidings of the king of Jews new-born.

But wherefore then did he do slay the children that were but one night old? Hereto St. Austin saith that Herod doubted that Jesus, to whom the stars served, might make himself some younger than he was.

A Right Vengeance

After this came upon Herod a right vengeance, for like as he dissevered many mothers from their children, in like wise was he dissevered from his children. It happed that he had suspicion upon his two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus; for one of his servants said to him that Alexander had promised to him great gifts if he would give to his father to drink poison or venom, and the barber said to the king that he had promised him a great thing if, when he made the king's beard, he would cut his throat, and for this cause Herod did do slay them both, and ordained in his testament that Antipater, his son, should be king after him.

Upon this Antipater, his son, had great desire to come to the realm, and was accused that he had made ready venom for to empoison his father, for a maid, a servant, afterward showed the same venom to the king, wherefore he did do put his son Antipater in prison. When Augustus, the emperor of Rome, heard say that Herod ruled thus his children, he then said: I had liefer be the swine or hog of Herod than his son, for he which is strange in his living spareth his swine, and he put to death his sons.

Herod when he was seventy years old he fell in a grievous malady by right vengeance of God, for a strong fever took him within and without; he had his flesh hot and dry chauffed, his feet swelled and became of a pale colour. The plants of his feet under began to rot, in such wise that vermin issued out, and a stench issued so great out of his breath and of his members without forth, that no persons might suffer it. On that other side he had great grief and annoy of the anger that he had for his sons.

When the masters and physicians saw that he might not be holpen by no medicine, then they said that this malady was a vengeance of God, and for as much as he heard say that the Jews were glad of his malady and sickness, therefore he did do assemble the most noble of the Jews out of the good towns, and did do put them in prison and said to Salome, his sister, and to Alexander her husband: I know well that the Jews shall be glad of my death, but if ye will do my counsel and obey to me I shall mowe have great plaint and wailing of many that shall bewEEP my death, in this wise that I shall show you. Anon as I shall be dead, do ye to be slain all the noble Jews that be in prison, and thus shall be no house of the Jews, but they shall, against their will, bewEEP my death.

The Death of Herod

And he had a custom to eat an apple last after meat. On a time he demanded a knife for to pare the apple, and one delivered him a knife, and shortly he took it, as all despaired, and would have slain himself, but anon Aciabus, his neighbour, caught his hand and cried loud, that it was supposed that the king had died.

Antipater his son, which was in prison, had heard the cry and weened his father had been dead. He was glad, and promised to the keepers of the prison great gifts for to let him out. When Herod knew this by his servant, he travailed the more grievously because his son was more glad of his death than of his sickness, and anon did do slay him, and ordained in his testament,

Archelaus to be king after him, and he lived but five days after and died in great misery of annoy.

Salome, his sister, did not his commandment of the Jews that were in prison, but let them go out. And Archelaus became king after Herod his father, which as to strangers in the battle he was fortunate and happy, but as to his own people he was right unhappy.

The [iconography of the Holy Innocents](#) is available at the [Christian iconography website](#).

For other saints, see the [index to this Golden Legend website](#).

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